

# **JAMES “JAY” WARD ON INCARCERATION AND HIS STRUGGLE TO BE FREE**



**THE FINAL STRAW RADIO - MARCH 24, 2024**

This week we share an interview with James “Jay” Ward, a long-time abolitionist who has been incarcerated in Ohio for over half his life, since he was 15. Over the years, he has participated in the national prison strike of 2018, various hunger strikes, and other movements against the abuse and mistreatment of incarcerated people.

One of his major political goals is to educate the public about the struggles he and other prisoners face to create systemic change. Without a sentence reduction, Jay will likely spend the next 25 years in prison as well. Jay is currently raising funds to pursue post-conviction relief so that he can reunite with friends and family and begin a new life on the outside. Despite Jay’s best efforts, he was not able to visit his mother before she died of an illness in 2022. He would like the chance to spend time with his father, who is also in poor health, before he passes.

- GoFundMe: <https://gofund.me/60f1291b>
- His ID # is A517461 for those who want to connect via **GettingOut**.
- Twitter / X: [@DecarcerateUS](https://twitter.com/DecarcerateUS)

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**TFSR: Maybe we can start with you just introducing yourself, who you are, and why you wanted to do this interview today?**

**James Ward:** Okay, my name is James Ward. The reason for this interview is to hopefully tell my story to those out there of my struggle of being in prison and trying to fight to get out of prison. I'm hoping to get that amplified to hopefully raise the funds, to do a fundraiser to accomplish my goal to hopefully get a lawyer.

**TFSR: How old were you when you first got locked up?**

**JW:** I was 15 years old.

**TFSR: What has it been for you since you've been in prison?**

**JW:** When I first got locked up, it really wasn't as stressful as it is now. I had my mom in my life more than I have now. I never really looked at the struggles then because I was fresh into the system and everything. It really didn't start affecting me until years later. Probably when I was about 18 to 19, maybe 20 years old, going through the constant struggle of trying to maintain contact with my family, of how hard it was to maintain contact with them and to get their support. It was hard because the way that I needed them and the way that I needed that support, they weren't there as much because they didn't understand the struggle of what I was going through. Also it was a lot of ways how the COs [Correctional Officers / Guards] would treat me every now and then. It's been really rough.

**TFSR: What was it like being a teenager, being so young and incarcerated among adults?**

**JW:** It was very confusing. At first, I really didn't have much understanding of how they could put juveniles in prison with adults for so long, even if it was their first time committing a crime. We're not even adults yet, how can we even be looked at as an adult? As a juvenile, we still can progress and make changes within ourselves, before we reach that stage of becoming an actual adult and being held accountable for the things that we commit as adults. It's a lot different coming in as a juvenile than coming in as an adult.

**TFSR: Yeah. One time, you mentioned to me that you didn't feel like you had very good representation and support when you were first going through the court system. Do you want to talk a little bit about that aspect?**

**JW:** Yeah, ok. When I first got locked up going through the court system, I was provided with a public defender, which later on I heard through other people that they're actually called "public pretenders" because of the simple fact that they pretend to defend you, they pretend to fight for you. That experience was difficult because of the simple fact that when the public defender told me how much time I could possibly get, I tried to have him talk with the prosecutors about possibly lowering the plea deal. Because the first deal that they tried to give me or that they wanted to give me was 20 years mandatory. And I'm thinking like, "Okay, I'm a first-time offender, I'm 15 years old," and so I asked him if he can talk to the prosecutors and try to get them to come down on the 20-year plea deal. About a week or so later, he came back in and talked to me, and he's like, "The prosecutors don't want to lower the plea deal." I was scared because of the simple fact that he said that if we went to trial, I could possibly get up to 64 years in prison.

Hearing that, I'm like, "My only option is to take the 20 years." It was a lot of fear that I had experienced during that time.

**TFSR: Yeah, that's very understandable. How long have you been in prison at this point? If nothing changes, what is the amount that's remaining in your sentence as of right now?**

**JW:** They initially sent me to prison in 2006. So I've been in prison for a good 18 years, if I've done the math right. If I do all my time, my out date is 2049. Because it was a point in time where I gave up and being young, I was doing things in the prison that got me extra time. That added at least, I'm not really sure of the math, probably 20 or so more years.

**TFSR: It sounds like you've had a lot of different times where you were really low and times where you've been fighting back. How has that been for you in the last 17 or so years?**

**JW:** Oh, man, that's a tough question. Like I was saying earlier, when I first

got locked up, it was okay, because I really didn't put my mind too much, mainly because my mom was there. But then over the years, I started experiencing the distancing that was coming from my family. My mom started getting distant. I started learning that it was because it was hard for her to know that I was going to be in prison for this long. [exhales] It's been hard for me as well, because of how hard it is been for me to keep in contact, and I tried to get her to be strong, so it would help me be strong. That was one of the biggest struggles that I've been experiencing since being in prison. I've always had to tell my mom, "I don't want things to end like this." I want there to be a better relationship between us before her time comes.

It just never really stuck with her because she didn't know how to handle it. When she did write, it would really upset her, because of the fact that she knows that I'm in here, and I'm not out there where I should be. The many other obstacles that I've faced, from needing to support myself, from getting retaliated on by COs... I had my rib broken when I was at Lucasville because three COs wanted to come into my cell because of something that I did in the past. They started beating on me with a little PR, like a billy club thing. Beating on me, in my head, punching me in my ribs. They never got anything, any type of punishment for it because they did it off camera. When I said something about it, they put me in the hole. They did an X-ray on my rib and saw it was fractured, but the staff never got any type of punishment. For the things that I do, I get punished all the time. Or if a CO possibly writes me out for what I may or may not have done, I still get punished for it.

So it's a lot of different struggles and difficulties that I've been through and am getting retaliated on. When I was in the 2018 National Prison Strike, I was put in the hole for going on strike. After that period, I got jumped on in my cell by a group of SRT [Security Operations Response Team] members and they had dislocated my shoulder. So I filed my lawsuit about a year later after that, while I was on another hunger strike protesting my safety, because some individuals were trying to jump me or something and I couldn't get out of the block that I was in. I was protesting my safety with the administration, and during that time that I was in the infirmary, two COs came in and beat me again. But my lawsuit failed because the simple fact that the lawyer that the courts gave me basically just threw it down the drain.

**TFSR: So you've been involved in various forms of activism for a long time. How did you get involved in that? And what activism have you been a part of over the years?**

**JW:** I've always had the mindset to speak up against what's wrong, the things that the CO does that are wrong. I really started probably in 2009 but I didn't get active-active until probably 2016-17, somewhere around there. I knew of organizations that were in place to help amplify prisoners' voices, all the wrongdoings that they faced in prison, and stuff like that, but I was never directly involved with them until about 2016-2017. And that's when I met another individual that was already involved with the organization called IWOC, which means Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee. We basically got together and started doing protests and hunger strikes concerning various wrongdoings that COs were doing, like writing false conduct reports or putting us in the hole for things we didn't even do.

There was an instance where we were put in the hole under 4B status, that is solitary confinement. And where we were located, we weren't allowed to get all of our property that we were allowed to have, because we weren't in actual 4B block. We were trying to go through the administration to get our property because that was our right to have our TV, our other clothes and stuff. But the people that were over the segregation department where we were at, they weren't allowing us to have our property. So we put together a demonstration to hopefully get all of our property. Instead of accomplishing that, we got retaliated on. They gave us more 4B time, more solitary confinement time. They actually ended up putting me on suicide watch, because they said that I tried to commit suicide. Everybody else ended up getting shot with pepper ball guns or something. A lot of us ended up losing certain privileges. It was a lot of different things going on around that time that I really can't recall most of, but I've been on different hunger strikes concerning conduct reports that were written on me that were false, trying to get them thrown out of my record. As I've said before, I've been beaten on for voicing the wrongdoings that I've encountered for writing up COs. There are many different things that I've been through since trying to stand up for my rights and trying to get my voice heard and everything.

**TFSR: With all of the political work that you've done and your experience being incarcerated, how has that shaped your political world-**

**dview and your beliefs about incarceration and prisoners' rights and things like that?**

**JW:** That's another hard question. It really did open my eyes to a lot that prisoners go through. And it shows me that it can be a better system, other than the system that is in place now. Because of the things that I've been through since I've been locked up, I'm sure that a lot of people know it's inhumane. It's things that people shouldn't even have to experience. The way it shaped me is that I've become a different person since I've got involved with a lot of the politicalness. Before, I wasn't really aware of a lot of stuff like I am now, on the political side. I was getting newsletters, I knew of organizations, but I wasn't really active with them or communicating with them or anything. I heard about stuff going on in other prisons, so, from that stage, I was already getting shaped into being my own political person.

The way I view things now is a lot different than how I was viewing it when I first got locked up. Now I feel like they should do away with prison and develop a better system that actually helps people rehabilitate themselves for crimes that they may commit. But I don't feel somebody should be locked up for so many years to the point where they become somebody worse than what they were. And I think at a point in time, I have experienced that myself.

**TFSR: Now you're trying to raise money to work on your case. Do you want to talk a little bit about that and your fundraiser?**

**JW:** At a point in time, I experienced myself where I felt like I was worse than when I first got locked up. I believe that a lot of us prisoners go through that. To me, I feel if somebody is locked up for so long, they experience a point in time where it's so excessive on them and it plays with their minds. Because people ain't created to be locked up like this. If it's so much, I feel it can force them to become something that they're really not.

I feel like I've experienced that. But I pulled myself out of it when I started getting involved with organizations, they have shown me a big difference. They have shown me that they're working on making things better for us prisoners. So inside I feel like they gave me hope. And I got involved with a lot of good people that, to this day, I really look at it as family.

**TFSR: Going off of an earlier question where you were talking about that time you have left here on your sentence, you're trying to raise money to pay for a lawyer. Did you want to talk about your fundraiser and share what that's about and why you're raising money for that?**

**JW:** [exhales] It's been a long struggle with that. I originally started trying to raise money for a lawyer to hopefully possibly get out before my mom passed away. The friends that I got in contact with after the National Prison Strike had helped me put up a fundraiser to raise the funds to afford the National Legal Professional Associates to work on my case. And it took a little while to raise the \$2,950 that I needed to hire them to do the research and everything. But we eventually raised the money and hired them and they did the research on my case and determined that the best possibility that I have to actually get out... Because that's what they're telling me: they're going to get me out. I just have to raise the money to afford the lawyer that they found for me. So they told me that the post-conviction is what they're going to do. But I didn't have a lawyer or anything, so they helped me find a lawyer who initially wanted \$18,000 to take my case. Well, the NLPA knows that I really don't have that money, so they communicated with him and got him to come down to \$12,000. Still, it's a lot of money that I don't have, and I've been trying to do whatever I can to raise money. But that's also been a struggle.

About probably a month ago, I got on the phone with the lawyer that the NLPA had found for me and I told him my situation, like "I really don't have the money. Is there anything that we could do?" It basically came down to him saying that he can't do anything for me unless I at least have \$5,000 upfront, and then we can work on some type of payment plan after that. So that's what I'm hoping for right now: to possibly at least raise \$5,000 so that I can hire him to take my case and hopefully get out of here before my dad possibly passes away, too.

**TFSR: What are some things that you're really looking forward to about being on the outside?**

**JW:** Oh, man. I would really to get the chance to meet my friends in person one day when I get out, but the thing that I'm really excited about what to



do is start my life: get things for myself, get a job, create the new beginning and just be free. Instead of having all these stipulations and obstacles that someone that's not free has to go through on an everyday basis, being imprisoned. Being told when you have to go eat or being told when you have to take a shower. [laughing in the background] My cellie is acting goofy right now... Being told to basically do everything that you can't do freely. I want to be able to do things when I want to do them: get in the shower when I want to get in the shower, eat when I want to eat.

I want to be able to provide for my family. I want to be able to help my family. Like my sister out there, they're struggling right now. I can't even help because I'm locked up in here to where I can't even get a real job. I'm looking forward to a lot of things and just getting my life on a better track.

**TFSR: That makes a lot of sense. Well, that was all the questions that I had. But is there anything else that you wanted to talk about? I'm sure we can probably do another chat if there's more stuff. But is there anything else that you wanted to talk about?**

**JW:** The last thing I could probably say is that I just really hope that this time I can accomplish the goal that I've been trying to accomplish since before my mom passed away. I'm hoping that this time, I can raise enough money to actually get this lawyer and get out before my father passes away. I've already lost my mom and that's been hard on me losing her while I've been in here trying to fight to get out. I just hope that the people who hear this can understand the importance, and how important it is for me to accomplish this goal.

**TFSR: Yeah. Well, I feel like this was a really good interview.**

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